

Narrative situations in literary texts

A well-meant warning before you delve into this: Narrative theory is not as clear-cut and unambiguous as this paper (or any other overview) might suggest. There are many diverging models regarding point-of-view, narrative mode, and narrative voice. This overview is meant to give you a rough and simplified guide on how to deal with these complex aspects.

The narrator (Who speaks?)

1. homodiegetic vs. heterodiegetic (Is the narrator a character in the story?)

In a **homodiegetic narrative**, the story is told by a (homodiegetic) narrator who is also one of **story's acting characters**. The prefix 'homo-' points to the fact that the individual who acts as a narrator is also a character in the story.

Rule of thumb: A text is **homodiegetic** if among its **story-related action sentences** there are some that contain first-person pronouns (*I did this; I saw this; this was what happened to me*), indicating that the narrator was at least a witness to the events depicted. Thus, a first-person narrator (see below) is usually homodiegetic.

In a **heterodiegetic narrative**, the story is told by a (heterodiegetic) narrator who is not present as a character in the story. The prefix 'hetero-' alludes to the 'different nature' of the narrator as compared to any and all of story's characters.

Rule of thumb: A text is **heterodiegetic** if all of its **story-related action sentences** are **third-person sentences** (*She did this, this was what happened to him*). Thus, an authorial narrator is usually heterodiegetic.

2. overt vs. covert (How obvious is the narrator?)

An **overt narrator** seems to have a distinct personality, who expresses himself with a distinct language or style or makes his or her opinions known. This puts an overt narrator into the **focus of the reader's attention**. An overt narrator can be identified when he/she addresses the reader directly (*Let me tell you about ...*, *Who of you would have thought that ...*) or when the way in which a text is written seems more important than what is actually said in the text.

A **covert narrator**, on the other hand, is **hardly noticeable**. Covert narration can be most easily achieved by letting the action be seen through the eyes of an **internal focalizer** (see below).

3. reliable vs. unreliable (Can we trust the narrative?)

A **reliable narrator** is narrator in whom the reader can **trust** with regard to the presentation of the fictional truth.

An **unreliable narrator** is a narrator who might be suspected of **distorting the fictional truth**. The main sources of unreliability are the narrator's **limited knowledge**, his **personal involvement**, and his individual **worldview**. Many first-person narrators are unreliable.

The Focaliser (Who sees?)

An **internal focaliser** is a **character** through whose eyes the reader the action is experienced and whose **thoughts** and **emotions** are presented to the reader. In most cases, there is only one internal focaliser in any given passage. An internal focaliser can also be called a **reflector**.

If there is no internal focaliser, the **narrator** usually acts as an **external focaliser**.

The three essential narrative situations

A **first-person** narrative is told by a narrator who is **present as a character** in his/her story (cf. *homodiegetic*) – it is a story of events s/he has experienced him- or herself, a story of **personal experience**. The individual who acts as a narrator (*narrating I*) is also a character (*experiencing I*) on the level of action.

An **authorial narrative** is told by a narrator who is **absent from the story**, i.e., does not appear as a character in the story (cf. *heterodiegetic*). The authorial narrator tells a story involving other people. An authorial narrator sees the story from an **outsider's position**, often a position of **absolute authority** that allows her/him to know everything about the story's world and its characters, including their conscious thoughts and unconscious motives

A **figural narrative** presents the story's events as seen through the eyes of a **third-person internal focaliser**, a character within the story whose **point of view** is **adopted by the reader**. The narrator of a figural narrative is a covert heterodiegetic narrator presenting an internal focaliser's consciousness, especially his/her perceptions and thoughts. One of the main effects of internal focalisation is to attract attention to the mind of the reflector-character and away from the narrator and the process of narration.

Types of discourse

Discourse refers to spoken or written communication as well as verbalised thoughts. Basically, there are three different types of discourse

Type	Example	Characteristics
direct discourse	Mary said/thought: "What on earth shall I do now?"	quoted speech
free indirect discourse (speech or thought)	What on earth should she do now?	The original quote is modified through the person/tense of the narrative
indirect discourse	Mary wondered what she should do.	the quote is a subordinate clause